FOCUS ON: COLLEGE READINESS

**'Soft Skills' Pushed as Part of College Readiness**



Denee Taylor, far right, takes a quiz in his statistics class at Northern Illinois University. The freshman says the noncognitive skills he learned in a high school program smoothed his way to college.

â€”John Zilch for Education Week

**By** [Caralee J. Adams](/ew/contributors/caralee.adams_3652335.html)

**[Back to Story](javascript:%7bwindow.location.replace('http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/11/14/12softskills_ep.h32.html')%7d)**

To make it in college, students need to be up for the academic rigor. But that's not all. They also must be able to manage their own time, get along with roommates, and deal with setbacks. Resiliency and grit, along with the ability to communicate and advocate, are all crucial life skills. Yet, experts say, many teenagers lack them, and that's hurting college-completion rates.

"Millennials have had helicopter parents who have protected them," said Dan Jones, the president of the [Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors](http://www.aucccd.org/) and the director of [counseling and psychological services](http://counseling.appstate.edu/index.php) at Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C. "They haven't had the opportunity to struggle. When they come to college and bad things happen, they haven't developed resiliency and self-soothing skills."

College enrollment is growing, but graduation rates remain flat. Among industrialized nations, the United States ranks ninth in the world in enrollment but last in completion rates, according to [an analysis of 18 countries**[Requires Adobe Acrobat Reader](http://www.oecd.org/edu/CN%20-%20United%20States.pdf)**](http://www.oecd.org/edu/CN%20-%20United%20States.pdf) by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

As educators look for ways to turn that showing around, many schools are incorporating the softer, noncognitive skills into college-readiness efforts. The ability to solve problems and be resourceful are viewed by some experts as being as important as mastering mathematics and reading. Helping teenagers develop those skills is being addressed in high schools, college-freshman orientation, youth-development organizations, and parenting programs.

## Infusing Responsibility

"I see parents and teachers jumping through hoops for kids, but I wonder if the kids are working as hard," said Susan Strickland, a counselor at Harrison High School in Kennesaw, Ga.

After a particularly rough fall about three years ago, in which seniors were asking for teacher-recommendation letters the day before college applications were due, Ms. Strickland decided it was time to step up efforts to teach responsibility. "It's not irritation. I'm worried about these kids," she said. "How to build capacity in students is vital."

At the 9th grade orientation meeting at Harrison High, students now learn about school rules through funny, interactive skits, and parents get the message to be supportive without overdoing it. Counselors conduct classroom lessons about goal-setting, self-advocacy, and the behavior of successful students. Teachers blog daily so students who miss class can go online to catch up on their missed assignments and be resourceful.

College-readiness efforts have often focused on getting more students into honors courses, helping with applications, and providing career counseling. But Mandy Savitz-Romer, a researcher at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, suggests that the emphasis needs to be simultaneously on access and success. "We need to pay attention to development," she said.

That means a shift in mind-set in the college-application process, as Ms. Savitz-Romer outlines in her book [*Ready, Willing, and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success*](http://www.hepg.org/hep/book/160/ReadyWillingAndAble), out this year and co-written by Harvard colleague Suzanne Bouffard. If students can have "agency" over the process, it enhances self-efficacy, Ms. Savitz-Romer said.

For example, instead of scolding students who fail to turn in financial-aid forms, counselors can get them to set up a system of reminders so it won't happen again. Teachers, too, can hold students accountable for missed work or poor behavior to emphasize responsibility and self-regulation.

For students to stick it out, the motivation for college should be about more than getting a degree to earn more money, Ms. Savitz-Romer said. "If they are there for the wrong reason, when things get tough, it's easy to step out."

## 'Proxy Parent'

At Aspire Lionel Wilson Preparatory Academy in Oakland, Calif., students are assigned to advisory groups in 6th grade (15 students to one teacher) and meet regularly through graduation to set goals and hold each other accountable. "The college dream is made up of ability, and it's absolutely tied to hopes, aspiration, and purpose," said Principal Michelle Cortez. "In advisory groups, we link those things."

For many of Wilson's students, who are from low-income, first-generation college-going families, the group becomes a "proxy parent" and support system, she said.

To develop communication skills, students lead conferences about their progress. They prepare presentations and discuss grades with their parents and advisory group. Teachers are trained to be quiet and focus on asking questions such as, "Why do you think this is happening?" The idea is for students to become problem solvers.

"They need to be advocating for themselves their entire career. If they don't practice, they won't learn how," said Ms. Cortez.

Moving from high school to college or work is a major life transition, said David Conley, a professor of education policy and leadership at the University of Oregon, in Eugene. And schools have largely ignored the social and psychological aspects in favor of knowledge, in part because it's easier to measure academic performance, he said.

Grades and SAT scores reflect other skills, such as study habits, focus, and time management, but they are all wrapped together, Mr. Conley said. He suggests schools provide two sets of grades—one that reflects mastery of content and the other behavior, as many elementary schools do.

"Given that we want students to be more successful, why not give actionable information needed to change behavior?" he said.

Teachers should also give students longer, more complex assignments for which they need to do research, work in groups, and develop a broader set of strategies, Mr. Conley added.

## Leadership Skills

Some nonprofits, such as the Chicago-based [OneGoal](http://www.onegoalgraduation.org/), are stepping in with a broader approach to college readiness. That organization, which operates in 20 nonselective public high schools in Chicago and six in Houston, hires teachers to work with underperforming juniors and seniors during the day in a credit-bearing class.

Along with boosting ACT scores and managing rigorous courses, the curriculum focuses on five principles of leadership: resilience, ambition, resourcefulness, integrity, and professionalism.

"If you ask me which makes a bigger impact on persistence, I'd say the noncognitive skills—unequivocally," said Jeff Nelson, a co-founder and the chief executive officer of OneGoal, which focuses on college completion.

The OneGoal teacher continues to monitor graduates—about 25 in a cohort—during their first year of college, talking with them about everything from grades to roommates to money issues.

Denee Taylor, now a freshman at Northern Illinois University, in DeKalb, said he was motivated to stay on track because he didn't want to let down his group and, particularly, his teacher.

"She worked so hard to help us all," the 19-year-old said of his teacher, Jen Koszyk, at [Prosser Career Academy](http://prosseracademy.org/) in Chicago. "It was a sense of admiration. … It'd be wrong of me to slack off."

Mr. Taylor said the program helped him grow up, learn how to balance college life, and make his transition smooth.

"A 4.0 student could come to college and get a 2.0. There are a lot of distractions here," he said. "It's not the academics. It's being too social that is going to mess you up."

The YMCA is using Ms. Savitz-Romer's book to be more intentional about working with students on issues of motivation, self-regulation, and self-efficacy, said Jarrett Royster, the Chicago-based organization's national director of urban and educational development.

"We help more kids go to college by helping them build resilience and character," he said. "We have an emphasis on the whole child. Sometimes, academics can be too narrowly focused versus recognizing the variety of factors that lead to academic outcomes."

Pam Mintz, a parenting education coordinator for YMCA Youth and Family Services, in Montgomery County, Md., lectures to parents about having their children, including teenagers, learn to manage money with an allowance and contribute to the household by doing chores. "As much as humanly possible, never do for a child what they can do for themselves," she said.

Too often, students underestimate how complicated the college experience will be to navigate. Just11 percent believe college will be "difficult," according to a survey by IQS Research, based in Louisville, Ky., this past summer. Fewer than one in five students were concerned about how to begin the college experience, it found.

"The expectations are not in alignment with reality," said Harlan Cohen, the author of [*The Naked Roommate and 107 Other Issues You Might Run Into In College*](http://www.nakedroommate.com/), published last year. "Students do not have the communication skills to navigate through adversity that is part of the normal transition to college."

Colleges sell the best moments in brochures. "The uncomfortable parts aren't illustrated. You don't see people crying, struggling, vomiting, dealing with roommate conflict or heartache," Mr. Cohen said.

To emotionally prepare students for campus life, he has helped craft a curriculum for high school seniors. "High schools are starting to realize that we desperately need to be responding, not just getting them into college, but getting them through," he said.

## 'They Won't Starve'

Parents and teachers can help students with the so-called soft skills in the way they communicate and force them to cope, experts say.

"This is the most coddled generation," said Robyn Lady, the director of student services at Chantilly High School in Chantilly, Va. "If they forget their lunch, don't bring it to them. They won't starve." Praise children for their efforts, not just their achievements, she added.

The work of promoting life skills is bigger than high school counselors can handle alone, especially since many have caseloads far into the hundreds. College counselors try to help incoming freshmen, but their resources are stretched and their priority is serving the most-troubled students. And many experts believe those soft skills need to be taught before students get to campus.

A holistic approach to college readiness that integrates academic content, college knowledge, and psychology may be what's needed to help more students complete college, said Andrea Venezia, a project director at WestEd, a research organization based in San Francisco. Rather than compartmentalization of college-readiness efforts, she advocates early training that includes noncognitive strategies and habits of mind that give students internal strength to persist.

"This is the critical nut to crack," she said, "if our country is really going to support success for all learners."

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